



## What's been happening with *The I-81 Challenge*?

The study team has been busy over the past several months. As you'll see from the focus of this newsletter, preparing for, conducting, and summarizing our May public workshops has been a major part of our work, but that is not all we have been doing. We convened our first Community and Municipal Liaison Committee meetings, where we received feedback from community organizations and municipalities about the progress of *The I-81 Challenge*. We also completed our second questionnaire. We've continued to update our website, blog, and Facebook page with new information about *The I-81 Challenge*, as well as adding relevant articles about similar projects in other cities.



Syracuse Metropolitan  
Transportation Council



New York State Department  
of Transportation

## What is *The I-81 Challenge*?

You have probably read or heard that portions of I-81, particularly the elevated sections of the highway in downtown Syracuse, are nearing the end of their lifespan. Over the coming decades, portions of the highway will need to be replaced, reconstructed, removed, or otherwise changed.

The New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT), the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC), and a Study Advisory Committee (SAC) have begun a process to engage a broad cross section of community members in identifying, developing, and evaluating options for the future of this vital corridor. Over the next several years, this process, known as *The I-81 Challenge*, will advance community discussions about the future of I-81.

Using the community's input, along with information about the highway's existing conditions, a wide range of options for the future of I-81 and a set of goals and objectives are being generated. This broad range of options will be narrowed down to a small number of viable options through a combination of technical analysis and continued public involvement. The viable options will ultimately be refined and analyzed in further detail, and a formal environmental review process will begin. That process will lead to a decision, and to a project or projects that can be implemented. It takes time to make a decision of this importance, and we need the public to stay involved every step of the way. Visit [www.thei81challenge.org](http://www.thei81challenge.org) to find out how you can stay informed of project updates.

## Results for the latest *I-81 Challenge* questionnaire now available

As part of a larger public outreach effort to provide information and gather input on *The I-81 Challenge*, we conducted a public opinion questionnaire of nearly 1000 residents of the greater Syracuse region in the Spring of 2011.

The primary purpose of the questionnaire was to collect information about how I-81 is currently used in Syracuse and to gauge residents' opinions regarding the future role of the highway in serving the needs of the community. For example, we learned that about half of respondents feel I-81 benefits the economy of downtown Syracuse, but almost two-thirds think I-81 negatively impacts the region by dividing the city and detracting from the look and feel of the city.

Are you interested in seeing how your neighbors use I-81, what they think about the highway now, and the benefits they see emerging from *The I-81 Challenge*?

Visit [www.thei81challenge.org](http://www.thei81challenge.org) to view the questionnaire results.



How do people use I-81? Find out in the *Questionnaire Summary* on our website.

## Nearly a thousand area residents participate in the first series of public workshops for *The I-81 Challenge*



Attendees learned about the project and shared their thoughts and concerns about the future of the corridor.

to learn about *The I-81 Challenge* and tell us their thoughts and concerns about the future of the corridor.

The SMTC and the NYSDOT hosted a series of open house-style public workshops for *The I-81 Challenge* at the Oncenter in downtown Syracuse on May 3, 4, and 7, 2011. Nearly one thousand area residents took the time, in person or via our virtual workshop,

Workshop attendees were invited to visit a series of “stations” featuring informational boards, videos, maps, and interactive exercises. The first station provided general background information about *The I-81 Challenge* and the process that will lead to a decision about the future of I-81. At Station 2, attendees viewed a video that presented the history of the Syracuse region’s transportation system. The video and informational boards showed how our modern transportation system evolved through the construction of the Erie Canal, railroads, and the interstate highway system. At the end of this station, attendees shared stories and memories about I-81 and how the highway impacts their lives on a “Story Wall.”

Stations 3, 4, and 5 presented technical analyses that have already been done for *The I-81 Challenge*. Station 3 illustrated road and bridge conditions as well as design issues on the roadway that lead to safety problems and congestion. Before leaving the station, attendees had the opportunity to identify and post their own ideas about deficiencies along I-81 on a large map of the corridor. Station 4 gave an overview of traffic modeling and its role in transportation planning. The station also included information about microsimulation models, which allow planners and engineers to understand detailed operational aspects of a transportation system. As an example of a microsimulation model, a looping video showed a six-minute VisSim model of the existing traffic conditions during morning and evening peak travel time along the I-81 viaduct. Station 5 explained the complex relationship between transportation investments and land use impacts and explored the growth of American cities, the transportation/land use cycle, regional transportation and land use challenges, and opportunities for positive change in the future.



The station also contained information on population, employment, cultural resources, environmental resources, and noise and air quality sensitive receptors.

Station 6 used a video and informational boards to present case studies from five cities that have faced challenges comparable to that of the Syracuse region and the I-81 corridor. After each case study, attendees were asked to comment on what they liked and did not like. The case studies presented at the workshops were:

- Reconstruct the highway (The Marquette Interchange project in Milwaukee, WI)
- Bury the highway (The ‘Big Dig’ in Boston, MA)
- Depress the highway (Fort Washington Way in Cincinnati, OH)
- Relocate the highway (I-195 “I-Way” in Providence, RI)
- Remove the highway (Central Freeway in San Francisco, CA)

Following the case studies, participants were encouraged to write or draw their own visions for I-81. Once participants were finished drawing or writing their visions, they posted the papers on the large “Visioning Wall.”



*Octavia Boulevard in San Francisco was one of the handful of case studies highlighted at the workshop. (Photo by Steve Boland, Nelson\Nygaard)*

Station 7 focused on the process for evaluating options for the future of I-81. An informational graphic illustrated this process, and the boards introduced a short list of draft study goals and objectives that had been developed based on previous public outreach. In a series of interactive exercises, participants were invited to help shape the goals for *The I-81 Challenge*. Immediately following the goals and objectives station, attendees had the opportunity to participate in breakout groups which complemented the earlier activities and provided participants an additional opportunity to share their concerns, visions, goals, and objectives in a group discussion setting.

## I-81 and the Syracuse region

Throughout the public outreach we have conducted for *The I-81 Challenge*, we have heard over and over again about the intimate connection between Syracuse and I-81. The highway is part of what defines this region - both for good and bad.

For many, the highway is a functional necessity, helping to maintain Syracuse’s image as a “20-minute city.” For the region’s residents, it serves a broad spectrum of travel purposes from daily commuting and work-related trips, to school-related and leisure trips, to errand and long-distance travel. I-81 connects the region’s population with many of the key destinations in Onondaga County and beyond, including our local hospitals and educational facilities, the airport, malls, regional market, and the Carrier Dome. We’ve heard often that the quick and easy access that I-81 affords to key destinations benefits the economy of the region as whole and downtown Syracuse specifically.

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### Missed the workshops?

You can still participate in our online “virtual” workshop.

You will find all of the information we presented in May with the same interactive opportunities.



[www.thei81challenge.org/virtual](http://www.thei81challenge.org/virtual)

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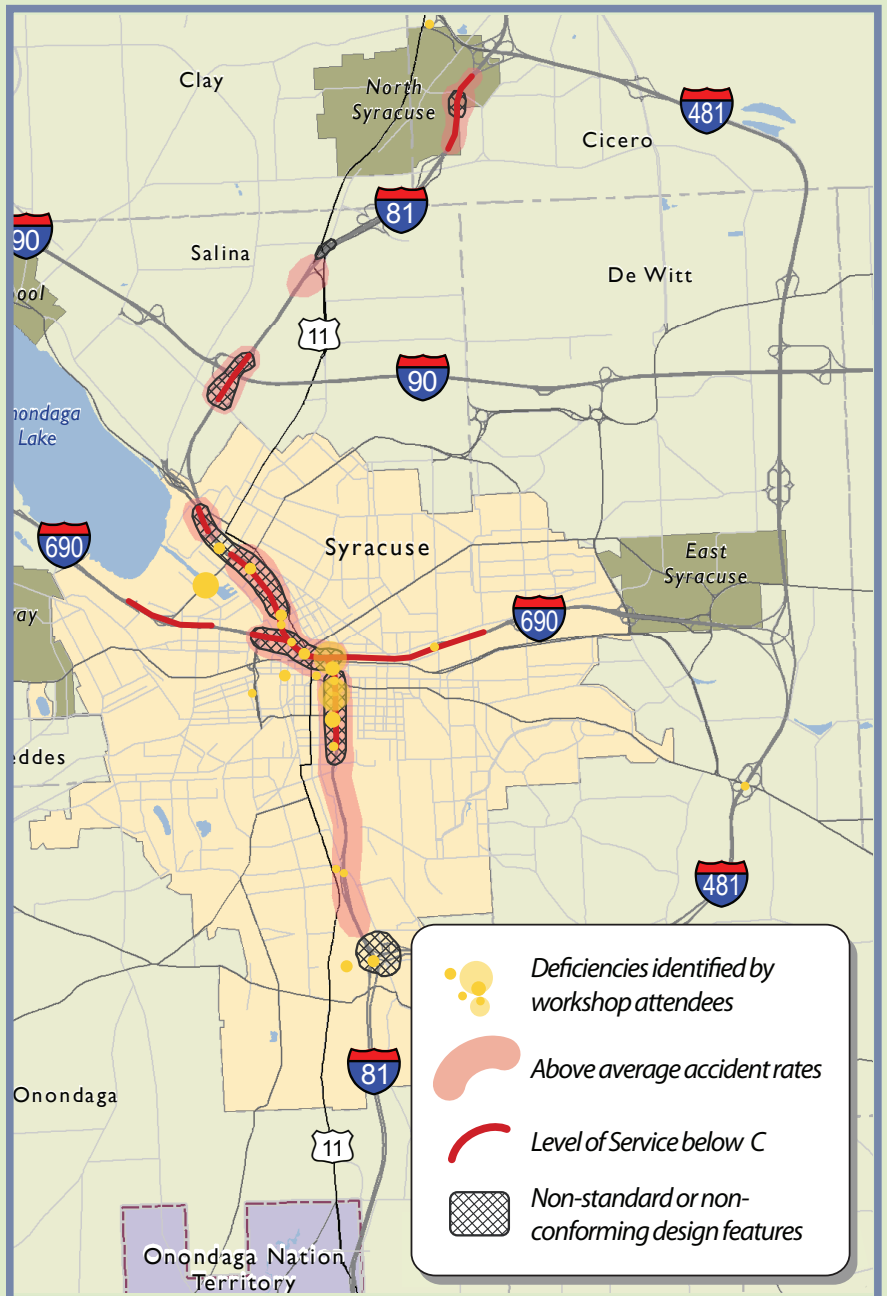
However, many people feel that I-81's impact on the region is not all positive. Residents have expressed concerns about the "costs" imposed by the highway. Many view I-81 as a physical and mental barrier that separates downtown from its adjacent neighborhoods. Some members of the public have also told us that I-81 detracts from the overall quality of life in our city through its unsightly structure, noise and air pollution, and encouragement of a car-centric culture that promotes suburban sprawl and discourages people from walking or biking.

## Deficiencies and needs

One of the first major pieces of technical work conducted for this study looked at the safety, design, and congestion problems along the I-81 corridor. That work focused on an analysis of the roadway geometry, bridge and highway conditions, and accident data. This has been part of our outreach process as well – having the public tell us their ideas about deficiencies and needs along I-81. What we found is that members of the public, though they expressed it in different terms, identified many of the same major issues as the technical analysis. The map at right shows the safety, congestion, and design deficiencies presented at the public workshops with an overlay of attendee input, noted with yellow dots. The size of the dot roughly corresponds to the frequency with which attendees identified the issue (larger dots indicate more comments).

Major deficiencies noted by the attendees are:

- The need for a connection from I-81 S to I-690 W and I-690 E to I-81 N;
- Congestion and safety concerns through the current I-690/I-81 interchange;
- Dangerous merges and ramps;
- Traffic congestion on local streets and the viaduct;
- Bike and pedestrian access and safety concerns under the viaduct; and
- Local access to downtown Syracuse from I-81.



## Your visions for the future of I-81

At the public workshops in May, we asked people to tell us their visions for the future of I-81 through both words and drawings. Though the specifics varied significantly, the visions attendees developed for the future of the corridor generally fell into three major categories:

### Rebuild the viaduct while addressing some of the fundamental flaws in the current design.

The primary goals of this vision were to keep commuting times low, minimize traffic congestion, and find a cost-effective solution. To address some of the deficiencies of the current viaduct, many participants suggested:

- reducing traffic congestion by adding new general use or HOV lanes and/or building a bypass highway around the west side of Syracuse;
- improving access to downtown and other parts of the region with new on and off ramps and a full interchange between I-81 and I-690;
- improving safety by lengthening merges and straightening sharp curves; and
- lessening the negative impacts of the highway on the surrounding area by incorporating sound dampening materials and public art as well as creating more inviting and usable public space under the viaduct.



*Many participants posted their ideas on the Visions Wall at the workshop.*

### Remove the viaduct and replace it with an urban boulevard or other thoroughfare integrated into the local street network.

The primary goals of this vision were to reintegrate downtown Syracuse with its surrounding neighborhoods, improve aesthetics, promote alternative modes of transportation, and lower long-term maintenance costs. To maintain traffic flow and mitigate possible congestion problems, this vision often included:

- reconnecting the downtown street grid, upgrading major streets to urban boulevards, and optimizing traffic flow through downtown through such means as traffic signal coordination;
- adding interchanges on I-81 both north and south of a new urban boulevard and along I-690 to provide additional options for downtown access; and
- rerouting I-81 along a different alignment (generally along the current I-481) and creating a bypass around the west side of Syracuse to alleviate the need for some traffic to pass through the downtown core.

### Replace the viaduct with a below grade highway – either in a tunnel or open trench – which would serve to reconnect the city, improve aesthetics, and maintain the mobility and accessibility offered by the Interstate highway.

The specifics of this vision varied greatly in terms of construction (tunnel or open trench) and local access (many exits to no exits). However, as with the other two visions, this one often included the creation of a bypass around the west side of Syracuse and improvements to the local land and streetscapes to make the area around the highway more visually appealing.

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In addition to these three visions, many workshop attendees provided ideas and suggestions regarding transit and bicycle/pedestrian improvements that could potentially become part of any future option for I-81.

Ideas for improving transit service in the Syracuse region included:

- increasing transit speed and reliability through signal priority and dedicated lanes for buses;
- adding new passenger amenities such as covered bus shelters and real-time travel information;
- increasing access to the system for those with disabilities through better ADA compliance; and
- adding new park-and-ride lots throughout the region.

Suggestions for new transit service included everything from bus rapid transit along major thoroughfares to light rail and a regional rail system.

Workshop attendees voiced a strong desire to make the city more bike and pedestrian “friendly” by:

- improving sidewalks and adding benches;
- improving street lighting;
- incorporating bike lanes into major streets; and
- implementing a bike-sharing program.

This overview of the types of visions we received is just the starting point for the next step in *The I-81 Challenge*. Over the coming months, we’ll be digging deeper into the hundreds of visions we received. We’ll be extracting common elements and crafting a series of approximately 10 “conceptual options” that encompass the public input we have received up to this point in the process, which we will then present to the public in our next round of public workshops before progressing to a more detailed stage of analysis.



*Many attendees provided ideas about transit and bicycle/pedestrian improvements.*

## Desired outcomes suggested by the community

Over the past several months people have given us a diverse array of concerns, goals, and visions for the future of I-81.



*While individual ideas about the future of I-81 differ, a set of common desired outcomes has begun to emerge.*

Ideas have sometimes conflicted, and in many cases people have presented completely different solutions for the same problem. However, despite the diversity of ideas, we have seen a set of common desired outcomes emerge. These desired outcomes transcend any specific vision and touch on what we ultimately hope to achieve with any project or projects that emerge from *The I-81 Challenge*. The table on the opposite page identifies some of these outcomes along with a sampling of supportive strategies that could help to achieve the desired outcome.

Desired outcomes	Example supportive strategies
<b>Enhance Region-Wide Mobility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain current travel times and access to key destinations – including hospitals</li> <li>• Keep traffic off of local streets</li> <li>• Enhance the connectivity of local streets</li> <li>• Build a bypass around the western side of Syracuse</li> </ul>
<b>Improve Public Safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fix geometric deficiencies</li> <li>• Install new and better lighting</li> <li>• Increase traffic enforcement</li> <li>• Enhance bicycle and pedestrian safety</li> </ul>
<b>Support Community Quality of Life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create livable, walkable communities</li> <li>• Incorporate complete streets and public spaces into designs</li> <li>• Reconnect neighborhoods</li> </ul>
<b>Maintain or Improve Economic Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote local businesses</li> <li>• Encourage infill development</li> <li>• Encourage population growth/high density development in Syracuse</li> </ul>
<b>Enhance the Transportation Network</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand transit services and options</li> <li>• Encourage alternative modes of travel</li> <li>• Provide more amenities for and education about alternative modes of travel</li> </ul>
<b>Exercise Fiscal Responsibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider both current construction and future maintenance costs</li> <li>• Look for smaller, more cost-effective changes first</li> <li>• Minimize the financial burden on current and future residents of the region</li> </ul>
<b>Ensure Proper Maintenance and Operation of the Transportation System</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider flooding and snow removal issues</li> <li>• Fix potholes</li> <li>• Reduce the use of salt in winter</li> </ul>
<b>Preserve or Enhance Environmental Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower gas consumption</li> <li>• Reduce noise and air pollution</li> <li>• Incorporate green space and green design technologies</li> <li>• Promote conservation and discourage sprawl</li> </ul>
<b>Improve the Visual Built Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remove the “barrier” effect of the highway</li> <li>• Create a signature project for the city</li> <li>• Make the space near/under the highway more inviting and visually appealing</li> </ul>

## What’s next?

**The I-81 Challenge is moving forward.** In the coming weeks we’ll be using input from the public workshops to:

- refine *The I-81 Challenge* Goals and Objectives;
- confirm the deficiencies and needs identified in “Technical Memorandum #1: Physical Conditions Analysis;” and
- develop a list of about 10 conceptual options for the future of I-81.

This list of conceptual options will be presented at our next round of public workshops so that we can gather additional feedback before beginning the detailed technical analysis and travel modeling. We will also be drafting a report on our public involvement efforts, synthesizing the input we have received to date. Public involvement efforts will continue through additional questionnaires, newsletters, website updates, continued use of social media, and future public workshops and open houses.



Visit our Blog:  
[www.thei81challengeblog.org](http://www.thei81challengeblog.org)



Visit our Facebook page:  
<http://www.facebook.com/thei81challenge>

These desired outcomes will eventually become an integral part of the goals and objectives for *The I-81 Challenge*. These will be used to measure and evaluate possible future options and provide the basis for determining the few options that will progress from *The I-81 Challenge* into a full environmental analysis. During the environmental analysis phase, a preferred project or projects will be identified to move forward into construction. However, before we get that far there is still much work to be done. What if we have an option that meets several of our goals but misses one that collectively we think is very important? How will we weigh the different goals and objectives against each other? These are not easy questions to answer, and we’ll be looking for your ideas in the coming months.

## Help us make sure we get it “right.”

Thousands of you have already joined *The I-81 Challenge* by participating in our workshops, taking our questionnaires, reading our blog and newsletters, and keeping up to date on the project via our website or through local news media. You are helping us identify what needs to be fixed, how to fix it, and ultimately what we want our region to look like. Public input is crucial throughout this process. No decision has been made. All options for the future of the highway are still on the table.

We still have a long way to go and we’ll need your continued participation through the entire process if we are to succeed. If you’ve already been involved, stay involved. If you haven’t yet joined us, we hope you will now. Our online virtual workshop is still open, and we encourage you to visit it. We’ll have a new questionnaire coming out in the next few months to which we hope you will respond, and we’re already planning for our next round of public meetings where we’ll present the work we’ve been doing translating your visions into conceptual options.

We’ve been profoundly encouraged by the response our community has shown so far, and we will continue to build off the momentum we have created. We are charting a course for our future that few other cities in this country have done, and many will look to us as an example. Help us make sure we get it “right.”



*We still have a long way to go and we’ll need your continued participation!*

Sincerely,

**James D’Agostino**

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*Regional Director,  
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